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DISCOVER YOUR CALLING: THE LIFE'S TASK

You possess a kind of inner force that seeks to guide you toward your Life's Task—what you are meant to accomplish in the time that you have to live. In childhood this force was clear to you. It directed you toward activities and subjects that fit your natural inclinations, that sparked a curiosity that was deep and primal. In the intervening years, the force tends to fade in and out as you listen more to parents and peers, to the daily anxieties that wear away at you. This can be the source of your unhappiness—your lack of connection to who you are and what makes you unique. The first move toward mastery is always inward—learning who you really are and reconnecting with that innate force. Knowing it with clarity, you will find your way to the proper career path and everything else will fall into place. It is never too late to start this process.

THE HIDDEN FORCE

Toward the end of April 1519, after months of illness, the artist Leonardo da Vinci felt certain that his death was only a few days away. For the past two years Leonardo had been living in the château of Cloux in France, the personal guest of the French king, François I. The king had showered him with money and honors, considering him the living embodiment of the Italian Renaissance, which he had wanted to import to France. Leonardo had been most useful to the king, advising him on all kinds of important matters. But now, at the age of sixty-seven, his life was about to end and his thoughts turned toward other things. He made out his will, received the holy sacrament in church, and then returned to his bed, waiting for the end to come.

As he lay there, several of his friends—including the king—visited him. They noticed that Leonardo was in a particularly reflective mood. He was not someone who usually liked to talk about himself, but now he shared memories from his childhood and youth, dwelling on the strange and improbable course of his life.

Leonardo had always had a strong sense of fate, and for years he had been haunted by one particular question: is there some kind of force from within that makes all living things grow and transform themselves? If such a force in nature existed, he wanted to discover it, and he looked for signs of it in every thing he examined. It was an obsession. Now, in his final hours, after his friends had left him alone, Leonardo would have almost certainly applied this question in some form or another to the riddle of his own life, searching for signs of a force or a fate that had brought about his own development and guided him to the present.

Leonardo would have begun such a search by first thinking back to his childhood in the village of Vinci, some twenty miles outside Florence. His father, Ser Piero da Vinci, was a notary and staunch member of the powerful bourgeoisie, but since Leonardo had been born out of wedlock, he was barred from attending the university or practicing any of the noble professions. His schooling therefore was minimal, and so as a child Leonardo was left mostly to himself. He liked most of all to wander through the olive groves around Vinci or to follow a particular path that led to a much different part of the landscape—dense forests full of wild boar, waterfalls cascading over fast-moving streams, swans gliding through pools, strange wildflowers growing out of the sides of cliffs. The intense variety of life in these forests enthralled him.

One day, sneaking into his father’s office, he grabbed some sheets of paper

—a rather rare commodity in those days, but as a notary his father had a large supply. He took the sheets on his walk into the forest, and sitting upon a rock he began to sketch the various sights around him. He kept returning day after day to do more of the same; even when the weather was bad, he would sit under some kind of shelter and sketch. He had no teachers, no paintings to look at; he did everything by eye, with nature as the model. He noticed that in drawing things he had to observe them much more closely and catch the details that made them come to life.

Once he sketched a white iris, and in observing it so closely he was struck by its peculiar shape. The iris begins as a seed, and then it proceeds through various stages, all of which he had drawn over the past few years. What makes this plant develop through its stages and culminate in this magnificent flower, so unlike any other? Perhaps it possesses a force that pushes it through these various transformations. He would wonder about the metamorphosis of flowers for years to come.

Alone on his deathbed, Leonardo would have thought back to his earliest years as an apprentice in the studio of the Florentine artist Andrea del Verrocchio. He had been admitted there at the age of fourteen because of the remarkable quality of his drawings. Verrocchio instructed his apprentices in all of the sciences that were necessary to produce the work of his studio—engineering, mechanics, chemistry, and metallurgy. Leonardo was eager to learn all of these skills, but soon he discovered in himself something else: he could not simply do an assignment; he needed to make it something of his own, to invent rather than imitate the Master.

One time, as part of his studio work, he was asked to paint an angel in a larger biblical scene designed by Verrocchio. He had decided that he would make his portion of the scene come to life in his own way. In the foreground in front of the angel he painted a flowerbed, but instead of the usual generalized renderings of plants, Leonardo depicted the flower specimens that he had studied in such detail as a child, with a kind of scientific rigor no one had seen before. For the angel’s face, he experimented with his paints and mixed a new blend that gave it a kind of soft radiance that expressed the angel’s sublime mood. (To help capture this mood, Leonardo had spent time in the local church observing those in fervent prayer, the expression of one young man serving as the model for the angel.) And finally, he determined that he would be the first artist to create realistic angelic wings.

For this purpose, he went to the marketplace and purchased several birds. He spent hours sketching their wings, how exactly they merged into their bodies. He wanted to create the sensation that these wings had organically grown from

the angel's shoulders and would bring it natural flight. As usual, Leonardo could not stop there. After his work was completed he became obsessed with birds, and the idea brewed in his mind that perhaps a human could really fly, if Leonardo could figure out the science behind avian flight. Now, several hours every week, he read and studied everything he could about birds. This was how his mind naturally worked—one idea flowed into another.

Leonardo would certainly have recalled the lowest point in his life—the year 1481. The Pope asked Lorenzo de' Medici to recommend to him the finest artists in Florence to decorate a chapel he just had built, the Sistine Chapel. Lorenzo complied and sent to Rome all of the best Florentine artists, excluding Leonardo. They had never really gotten along. Lorenzo was a literary type, steeped in the classics. Leonardo could not read Latin and had little knowledge of the ancients. He had a more scientific bent to his nature. But at the root of Leonardo's bitterness at this snub was something else—he had come to hate the dependence forced upon artists to gain royal favor, to live from commission to commission. He had grown tired of Florence and the court politics that reigned there.

He made a decision that would change everything in his life: He would establish himself in Milan, and he would devise a new strategy for his livelihood. He would be more than an artist. He would pursue all of the crafts and sciences that interested him—architecture, military engineering, hydraulics, anatomy, sculpture. For any prince or patron that wanted him, he could serve as an overall adviser and artist, for a nice stipend. His mind, he decided, worked best when he had several different projects at hand, allowing him to build all kinds of connections between them.

Continuing his self-examination, Leonardo would have thought back to the one great commission that he accepted during this new phase of his life—an enormous bronze equestrian statue in memory of Francesco Sforza, the father of the current duke of Milan. The challenge for him was too irresistible. It would be of a scale no one had seen since the days of ancient Rome, and to cast something so large in bronze would require an engineering feat that had baffled all of the artists of his time. Leonardo worked on the design for months, and to test it out he built a clay replica of the statue and displayed it in the most expansive square in Milan. It was gigantic, the size of a large building. The crowds that gathered to look at it were awestruck—its size, the impetuous stance of the horse that the artist had captured, its terrifying aspect. Word spread throughout Italy of this marvel and people anxiously awaited its realization in bronze. For this purpose, Leonardo invented a totally new way of casting. Instead of breaking up the mold for the horse into sections, Leonardo would construct the mold as one seamless

piece (using an unusual mix of materials he had concocted) and cast it as a whole, which would give the horse a much more organic, natural appearance.

A few months later, however, war broke out and the duke needed every bit of bronze he could lay his hands on for artillery. Eventually, the clay statue was taken down and the horse was never built. Other artists had scoffed at Leonardo's folly—he had taken so long to find the perfect solution that naturally, events had conspired against him. One time even Michelangelo himself taunted Leonardo: "You who made a model of a horse you could never cast in bronze and which you gave up, to your shame. And the stupid people of Milan had faith in you?" He had become used to such insults about his slowness at work, but in fact he regretted nothing from this experience. He had been able to test out his ideas on how to engineer large-scale projects; he would apply this knowledge elsewhere. Anyway, he didn't care so much about the finished product; it was the search and process in creating something that had always excited him.

Reflecting on his life in this way, he would have clearly detected the workings of some kind of hidden force within him. As a child this force had drawn him to the wildest part of the landscape, where he could observe the most intense and dramatic variety of life. This same force compelled him to steal paper from his father and devote his time to sketching. It pushed him to experiment while working for Verrocchio. It guided him away from the courts of Florence and the insecure egos that flourished among artists. It compelled him to an extreme of boldness—the gigantic sculptures, the attempt to fly, the dissection of hundreds of corpses for his anatomical studies—all to discover the essence of life itself.

Seen from this vantage point, everything in his life made sense. It was in fact a blessing to have been born illegitimate—it allowed him to develop in his own way. Even the paper in his house seemed to indicate some kind of destiny. What if he had rebelled against this force? What if, after the Sistine Chapel rejection, he had insisted on going to Rome with the others and forced his way into the Pope's good graces instead of seeking his own path? He was capable of that. What if he had devoted himself to mostly painting in order to make a good living? What if he had been more like the others, finishing his works as fast as possible? He would have done well, but he would not have been Leonardo da Vinci. His life would have lacked the purpose that it had, and inevitably things would have gone wrong.

This hidden force within him, like that within the iris he had sketched so many years before, had led to the full flowering of his capacities. He had faithfully followed its guidance to the very end and, having completed his course, now it was time to die. Perhaps his own words, written years before in

his notebook, would have come back to him in such a moment: “Just as a well-filled day brings blessed sleep, so a well-employed life brings a blessed death.”

KEYS TO MASTERY

> *Among his various possible beings each man always finds one which is his genuine and authentic being. The voice which calls him to that authentic being is what we call “vocation.” But the majority of men devote themselves to silencing that voice of the vocation and refusing to hear it. They manage to make a noise within themselves…to distract their own attention in order not to hear it; and they defraud themselves by substituting for their genuine selves a false course of life.*
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> —JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

Many of the greatest Masters in history have confessed to experiencing some kind of force or voice or sense of destiny that has guided them forward. For Napoleon Bonaparte it was his “star” that he always felt in ascendance when he made the right move. For Socrates, it was his daemon, a voice that he heard, perhaps from the gods, which inevitably spoke to him in the negative—telling him what to avoid. For Goethe, he also called it a daemon—a kind of spirit that dwelled within him and compelled him to fulfill his destiny. In more modern times, Albert Einstein talked of a kind of inner voice that shaped the direction of his speculations. All of these are variations on what Leonardo da Vinci experienced with his own sense of fate.

Such feelings can be seen as purely mystical, beyond explanation, or as hallucinations and delusions. But there is another way to see them—as eminently real, practical, and explicable. It can be explained in the following way:

All of us are born unique. This uniqueness is marked genetically in our DNA. We are a one-time phenomenon in the universe—our exact genetic makeup has never occurred before nor will it ever be repeated. For all of us, this uniqueness first expresses itself in childhood through certain primal inclinations. For Leonardo it was exploring the natural world around his village and bringing it to life on paper in his own way. For others, it can be an early attraction to visual patterns—often an indication of a future interest in mathematics. Or it can be an attraction to particular physical movements or spatial arrangements. How can we explain such inclinations? They are *forces* within us that come from a deeper place than conscious words can express. They draw us to certain experiences and away from others. As these forces move us here or there, they influence the development of our minds in very particular ways.

This primal uniqueness naturally wants to assert and express itself, but

some experience it more strongly than others. With Masters it is so strong that it feels like something that has its own external reality—a force, a voice, destiny. In moments when we engage in an activity that corresponds to our deepest inclinations, we might experience a touch of this: We feel as if the words we write or the physical movements we perform come so quickly and easily that they are coming from outside us. We are literally "inspired," the Latin word meaning something from the outside breathing within us.

Let us state it in the following way: At your birth a seed is planted. That seed is your uniqueness. It wants to grow, transform itself, and flower to its full potential. It has a natural, assertive energy to it. Your Life's Task is to bring that seed to flower, to express your uniqueness through your work. You have a destiny to fulfill. The stronger you feel and maintain it—as a force, a voice, or in whatever form—the greater your chance for fulfilling this Life's Task and achieving mastery.

What weakens this force, what makes you not feel it or even doubt its existence, is the degree to which you have succumbed to another force in life—social pressures to conform. This *counterforce* can be very powerful. You want to fit into a group. Unconsciously, you might feel that what makes you different is embarrassing or painful. Your parents often act as a counter-force as well. They may seek to direct you to a career path that is lucrative and comfortable. If these counterforces become strong enough, you can lose complete contact with your uniqueness, with who you really are. Your inclinations and desires become modeled on those of others.

This can set you off on a very dangerous path. You end up choosing a career that does not really suit you. Your desire and interest slowly wane and your work suffers for it. You come to see pleasure and fulfillment as something that comes from outside your work. Because you are increasingly less engaged in your career, you fail to pay attention to changes going on in the field—you fall behind the times and pay a price for this. At moments when you must make important decisions, you flounder or follow what others are doing because you have no sense of inner direction or radar to guide you. You have broken contact with your destiny as formed at birth.

At all cost you must avoid such a fate. The process of following your Life's Task all the way to mastery can essentially begin at any point in life. The hidden force within you is always there and ready to be engaged.

The process of realizing your Life's Task comes in three stages: First, you must connect or reconnect with your inclinations, that sense of uniqueness. The first step then is always inward. You search the past for signs of that inner voice or force. You clear away the other voices that might confuse you—parents and

peers. You look for an underlying pattern, a core to your character that you must understand as deeply as possible.

Second, with this connection established, you must look at the career path you are already on or are about to begin. The choice of this path—or redirection of it—is critical. To help in this stage you will need to enlarge your concept of work itself. Too often we make a separation in our lives—there is work and there is life outside work, where we find real pleasure and fulfillment. Work is often seen as a means for making money so we can enjoy that second life that we lead. Even if we derive some satisfaction from our careers we still tend to compartmentalize our lives in this way. This is a depressing attitude, because in the end we spend a substantial part of our waking life at work. If we experience this time as something to get through on the way to real pleasure, then our hours at work represent a tragic waste of the short time we have to live.

Instead you want to see your work as something more inspiring, as part of your *vocation*. The word "vocation" comes from the Latin meaning to call or to be called. Its use in relation to work began in early Christianity—certain people were called to a life in the church; that was their vocation. They could recognize this literally by hearing a voice from God, who had chosen them for this profession. Over time, the word became secularized, referring to any work or study that a person felt was suited to his or her interests, particularly a manual craft. It is time, however, that we return to the original meaning of the word, for it comes much closer to the idea of a Life's Task and mastery.

The voice in this case that is calling you is not necessarily coming from God, but from deep within. It emanates from your individuality. It tells you which activities suit your character. And at a certain point, it calls you to a particular form of work or career. Your work then is something connected deeply to who you are, not a separate compartment in your life. You develop then a sense of your vocation.

Finally, you must see your career or vocational path more as a journey with twists and turns rather than a straight line. You begin by choosing a field or position that roughly corresponds to your inclinations. This initial position offers you room to maneuver and important skills to learn. You don't want to start with something too lofty, too ambitious—you need to make a living and establish some confidence. Once on this path you discover certain side routes that attract you, while other aspects of this field leave you cold. You adjust and perhaps move to a related field, continuing to learn more about yourself, but always expanding off your skill base. Like Leonardo, you take what you do for others and make it your own.

Eventually, you will hit upon a particular field, niche, or opportunity that

suits you perfectly. You will recognize it when you find it because it will spark that childlike sense of wonder and excitement; it will feel right. Once found, everything will fall into place. You will learn more quickly and more deeply. Your skill level will reach a point where you will be able to claim your independence from within the group you work for and move out on your own. In a world in which there is so much we cannot control, this will bring you the ultimate form of power. You will determine your circumstances. As your own Master, you will no longer be subject to the whims of tyrannical bosses or scheming peers.

This emphasis on your uniqueness and a Life's Task might seem a poetic conceit without any bearing on practical realities, but in fact it is extremely relevant to the times that we live in. We are entering a world in which we can rely less and less upon the state, the corporation, or family or friends to help and protect us. It is a globalized, harshly competitive environment. We must learn to develop ourselves. At the same time, it is a world teeming with critical problems and opportunities, best solved and seized by entrepreneurs—individuals or small groups who think independently, adapt quickly, and possess unique perspectives. Your individualized, creative skills will be at a premium.

Think of it this way: What we lack most in the modern world is a sense of a larger purpose to our lives. In the past, it was organized religion that often supplied this. But most of us now live in a secularized world. We human animals are unique—we must build our own world. We do not simply react to events out of biological scripting. But without a sense of direction provided to us, we tend to flounder. We don't how to fill up and structure our time. There seems to be no defining purpose to our lives. We are perhaps not conscious of this emptiness, but it infects us in all kinds of ways.

Feeling that we are called to accomplish something is the most positive way for us to supply this sense of purpose and direction. It is a religious-like quest for each of us. This quest should not be seen as selfish or antisocial. It is in fact connected to something much larger than our individual lives. Our evolution as a species has depended on the creation of a tremendous diversity of skills and ways of thinking. We thrive by the collective activity of people supplying their individual talents. Without such diversity, a culture dies.

Your uniqueness at birth is a marker of this necessary diversity. To the degree you cultivate and express it you are fulfilling a vital role. Our times might emphasize equality, which we then mistake for the need for everyone to be the same, but what we really mean by this is the equal chance for people to express their differences, to let a thousand flowers bloom. Your vocation is more than the work that you do. It is intimately connected to the deepest part of your being and

is a manifestation of the intense diversity in nature and within human culture. In this sense, you must see your vocation as eminently poetic and inspiring.

Some 2,600 years ago the ancient Greek poet Pindar wrote, “Become who you are by learning who you are.” What he meant is the following: You are born with a particular makeup and tendencies that mark you as a piece of fate. It is who you are to the core. Some people never become who they are; they stop trusting in themselves; they conform to the tastes of others, and they end up wearing a mask that hides their true nature. If you allow yourself to learn who you really are by paying attention to that voice and force within you, then you can become what you were fated to become—an individual, a Master.

STRATEGIES FOR FINDING YOUR LIFE’S TASK

> *The misery that oppresses you lies not in your profession but in yourself! What man in the world would not find his situation intolerable if he chooses a craft, an art, indeed any form of life, without experiencing an inner calling? Whoever is born with a talent, or to a talent, must surely find in that the most pleasing of occupations! Everything on this earth has its difficult sides! Only some inner drive—pleasure, love—can help us overcome obstacles, prepare a path, and lift us out of the narrow circle in which others tread out their anguished, miserable existences!*
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> —JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

It might seem that connecting to something as personal as your inclinations and Life’s Task would be relatively simple and natural, once you recognize their importance. But in fact it is the opposite. It requires a good deal of planning and strategizing to do it properly, since so many obstacles will present themselves. The following five strategies, illustrated by stories of Masters, are designed to deal with the main obstacles in your path over time—the voices of others infecting you, fighting over limited resources, choosing false paths, getting stuck in the past, and losing your way. Pay attention to all of them because you will almost inevitably encounter each one in some form.

1. Return to your origins—The primal inclination strategy

For Masters, their inclination often presents itself to them with remarkable clarity in childhood. Sometimes it comes in the form of a simple object that triggers a deep response. When Albert Einstein (1879–1955) was five, his father gave him a compass as a present. Instantly, the boy was transfixed by the needle, which changed direction as he moved the compass about. The idea that there was some kind of magnetic force that operated on this needle, invisible to the eyes, touched him to the core. What if there were other forces in the world equally invisible yet equally powerful—ones that were undiscovered or not understood? For the rest of his life all of his interests and ideas would revolve around this simple question of hidden forces and fields, and he would often think back to the compass that had sparked the initial fascination.

When Marie Curie (1867–1934), the future discoverer of radium, was four years old she wandered into her father's study and stood transfixed before a glass case that contained all kinds of laboratory instruments for chemistry and physics experiments. She would return to that room again and again to stare at the instruments, imagining all sorts of experiments she could conduct with these tubes and measuring devices. Years later, when she entered a real laboratory for the first time and did some experiments herself, she reconnected immediately with her childhood obsession; she knew she had found her vocation.

When the future film director Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007) was nine years old his parents gave his brother for Christmas a cinematograph—a moving picture machine with strips of film that projected simple scenes. He had to have it for himself. He traded his own toys to get it and once it was in his possession, he hurried into a large closet and watched the flickering images it projected on the wall. It seemed like something had magically come to life each time he turned it on. To produce such magic would become his lifelong obsession.

Sometimes this inclination becomes clear through a particular activity that brings with it a feeling of heightened power. As a child, Martha Graham (1894–1991) felt intensely frustrated by her inability to make others understand her in a deep way; words seemed inadequate. Then one day, she saw her first dance performance. The lead dancer had a way of expressing certain emotions through

movement; it was visceral, not verbal. She started dance lessons soon thereafter and immediately understood her vocation. Only when dancing could she feel alive and expressive. Years later she would go on to invent a whole new form of dance and revolutionize the genre.

Sometimes it is not an object or activity but rather something in culture that sparks a deep connection. The contemporary anthropologist-linguist Daniel Everett (b. 1951) grew up on the California-Mexico border, in a cowboy town. From a very early age, he found himself drawn to the Mexican culture around him. Everything about it fascinated him—the sound of the words spoken by the migrant workers, the food, the manners that were so different from the Anglo world. He immersed himself as much as he could in their language and culture. This would transform into a lifelong interest in the Other—the diversity of cultures on the planet and what that means about our evolution.

And sometimes one's true inclinations can be revealed through an encounter with an actual Master. As a young boy growing up in North Carolina, John Coltrane (1926–67) felt different and strange. He was much more serious than his schoolmates; he experienced emotional and spiritual longings he did not know how to verbalize. He drifted into music more as a hobby, taking up the saxophone and playing in his high school band. Then a few years later he saw the great jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker perform live, and the sounds Parker produced touched Coltrane to the core. Something primal and personal came through Parker's saxophone, a voice from deep within. Coltrane suddenly saw the means for expressing his uniqueness and giving a voice to his own spiritual longings. He began to practice the instrument with such intensity that within a decade he transformed himself into perhaps the greatest jazz artist of his era.

You must understand the following: In order to master a field, you must love the subject and feel a profound connection to it. Your interest must transcend the field itself and border on the religious. For Einstein, it was not physics but a fascination with invisible forces that governed the universe; for Bergman, it was not film but the sensation of creating and animating life; for Coltrane, it was not music but giving voice to powerful emotions. These childhood attractions are hard to put into words and are more like sensations—that of deep wonder,

sensual pleasure, power, and heightened awareness. The importance of recognizing these preverbal inclinations is that they are clear indications of an attraction that is not infected by the desires of other people. They are not something embedded in you by your parents, which come with a more superficial connection, something more verbal and conscious. Coming instead from somewhere deeper, they can only be your own, reflections of your unique chemistry.

As you become more sophisticated, you often lose touch with these signals from your primal core. They can be buried beneath all of the other subjects you have studied. Your power and future can depend on reconnecting with this core and returning to your origins. You must dig for signs of such inclinations in your earliest years. Look for its traces in visceral reactions to something simple; a desire to repeat an activity that you never tired of; a subject that stimulated an unusual degree of curiosity; feelings of power attached to particular actions. It is already there within you. You have nothing to create; you merely need to dig and refind what has been buried inside of you all along. If you reconnect with this core at any age, some element of that primitive attraction will spark back to life, indicating a path that can ultimately become your Life’s Task.

2. Occupy the perfect niche—The Darwinian strategy

A. As a child growing up in Madras, India, in the late 1950s, V. S. Ramachandran knew he was different. He was not interested in sports or the other usual pursuits of boys his age; he loved to read about science. In his loneliness he would often wander along the beach, and soon he became fascinated by the incredible variety of seashells that washed up on shore. He began to collect them and study the subject in detail. It gave him a feeling of power—here was a field he had all to himself; nobody in school could ever know as much as he did about shells. Soon he was drawn to the strangest varieties of seashells, such as the Xenophora, an organism that collects discarded shells and uses them for camouflage. In a way, he was like the Xenophora—an anomaly. In nature, these anomalies often serve a larger evolutionary purpose—they can lead to the occupation of new ecological niches, offering a greater chance of survival. Could Ramachandran say the same about his own strangeness?

Over the years, he transferred this boyhood interest into other subjects—human anatomical abnormalities, peculiar phenomena in chemistry, and so on. His father, fearing that the young man would end up in some esoteric field of research, convinced him to enroll in medical school. There he would be exposed to all sides of science and he would come out of it with a practical skill. Ramachandran complied.

Although the studies in medical school interested him, after a while he grew restless. He disliked all of the rote learning. He wanted to experiment and discover, not memorize. He began to read all kinds of science journals and books that were not on the reading list. One such book was *Eye and Brain*, by the visual neuroscientist Richard Gregory. What particularly intrigued him were experiments on optical illusions and blind spots—anomalies in the visual system that could explain something about how the brain itself functioned.

Stimulated by this book, he conducted his own experiments, the results of which he managed to get published in a prestigious journal, which in turn led to an invitation to study visual neuroscience in the graduate department at Cambridge University. Excited by this chance to pursue something more suited to his interests, Ramachandran accepted the invitation. After a few months at Cambridge, however, he realized that he did not fit in this environment. In his boyhood dreams, science was a great romantic adventure, an almost religious-like quest for the truth. But at Cambridge, for the students and faculty, it seemed to be more like a job; you put in your hours, you contributed some small piece to

a statistical analysis, and that was that.

He soldiered on, finding his own interests within the department, and completed his degree. A few years later he was hired as an assistant professor in visual psychology at the University of California at San Diego. As had happened so many times before, after a few years his mind began to drift to yet another subject—this time to the study of the brain itself. He became intrigued by the phenomenon of phantom limbs—people who have had an arm or leg amputated and yet still feel a paralyzing pain in the missing limb. He proceeded to conduct experiments on phantom limb subjects. These experiments led to some exciting discoveries about the brain itself, as well as a novel way to relieve such patients of their pain.

Suddenly the feeling of not fitting in, of restlessness, was gone. Studying anomalous neurological disorders would be the subject to which he could devote the rest of his life. It opened up questions that fascinated him about the evolution of consciousness, the origin of language, and so on. It was as if he had come full circle to the days of collecting the rarest forms of seashells. This was a niche he had all to himself, one he could command for years to come, that corresponded to his deepest inclinations and would serve best the cause of scientific advancement.

B. For Yoky Matsuoka, childhood was a period of confusion and blur. Growing up in Japan in the 1970s, everything seemed laid out for her in advance. The school system would funnel her into a field that was appropriate for girls, and the possibilities were rather narrow. Her parents, believing in the importance of sports in her development, pushed her into competitive swimming at a very early age. They also had her take up the piano. For other children in Japan it may have been comforting to have their lives directed in such a fashion, but for Yoky it was painful. She was interested in all kinds of subjects—particularly math and science. She liked sports but not swimming. She had no idea what she wanted to become or how she could possibly fit into such a regimented world.

At the age of eleven she finally asserted herself. She had had enough of swimming and wanted to take up tennis. Her parents agreed to her wishes. Being intensely competitive, she had great dreams for herself as a tennis player, but she was starting out in the sport rather late in life. To make up for lost time she would have to undergo an almost impossibly rigorous practice schedule. She traveled outside Tokyo for training and so would do her homework on the ride back at night. Often having to stand up in the crowded car, she would crack open her math and physics books and work out the equations. She loved solving

puzzles, and in doing this homework her mind would become so completely absorbed in the problems that she was barely aware of the time passing. In a strange way, it was similar to the sensation she felt on the tennis court—a deep focus where nothing could distract her.

In the few free moments on the train Yoky would think about her future. Science and sports were the two great interests in her life. In them she could express all of the different sides of her character—her love of competing, working with her hands, moving gracefully, analyzing and solving problems. In Japan you had to choose a career that was generally quite specialized. Whatever she chose would require sacrificing her other interests, which depressed her to no end. One day she daydreamed about inventing a robot that could play tennis with her. Inventing and playing against such a robot would satisfy all of the different sides of her character, but it was only a dream.

Although she had risen through the ranks to become one of the top tennis prospects in Japan, she quickly realized that this was not to be her future. In practice, no one could beat her, but in competition she would often freeze up, overthink the situation, and lose to inferior players. She also suffered some debilitating injuries. She would have to focus on academics and not on sports. After attending a tennis academy in Florida, she convinced her parents to let her stay in the States and apply to the University of California at Berkeley.

At Berkeley she could not decide on a major—nothing seemed to quite fit her wide-ranging interests. For lack of anything better, she settled on electrical engineering. One day she confided to a professor in her department about her youthful dream to build a robot to play tennis with her. Much to her surprise the professor did not laugh, but instead invited her to join his graduate lab for robotics. Her work there showed so much promise that she was later admitted to graduate school at MIT, where she joined the artificial-intelligence lab of robotics pioneer Rodney Brooks. They were developing a robot with artificial intelligence, and Matsuoka volunteered to design the hand and arms.

Ever since she was a child she had pondered her own hands while she was playing tennis or the piano or while scribbling out math equations. The human hand was a miracle of design. Although this was not exactly sports, she would be working with her hands to construct the hand. Finding at last something that suited a larger range of her interests, she worked night and day on building a new kind of robotic limb, one that possessed as much as possible the delicate grasping power of the human hand. Her design dazzled Brooks—it was years ahead of anything anyone had ever developed.

Feeling that there was a critical lack in her knowledge, she decided to gain an additional degree in neuroscience. If she could better understand the

connection between the hand and the brain, she could design a prosthetic limb that would feel and respond like a human hand. She continued this process, adding new fields of science to her résumé, culminating in the creation of a completely new field, one that she would dub *neurobotics*—the design of robots that possessed simulated versions of human neurology, bringing them closer to life itself. Forging this field would bring her great success in science and put her in the ultimate position of power—the ability to freely combine all of her interests.

The career world is like an ecological system: People occupy particular fields within which they must compete for resources and survival. The more people there are crowded into a space, the harder it becomes to thrive there. Working in such a field will tend to wear you out as you struggle to get attention, to play the political games, to win scarce resources for yourself. You spend so much time at these games that you have little time left over for true mastery. You are seduced into such fields because you see others there making a living, treading the familiar path. You are not aware of how difficult such a life can be.

The game you want to play is different: to instead find a niche in the ecology that you can dominate. It is never a simple process to find such a niche. It requires patience and a particular strategy. In the beginning you choose a field that roughly corresponds to your interests (medicine, electrical engineering). From there you can go in one of two directions. The first is the Ramachandran path. From within your chosen field, you look for side paths that particularly attract you (in his case the science of perception and optics). When it is possible, you make a move to this narrower field. You continue this process until you eventually hit upon a totally unoccupied niche, the narrower the better. In some ways, this niche corresponds to your uniqueness, much as Ramachandran's particular form of neurology corresponds to his own primal sense of feeling like an exception.

The second is the Matsuoka path. Once you have mastered your first field (robotics), you look for other subjects or skills that you can conquer (neuroscience), on your own time if necessary. You can now combine this added field of knowledge to the original one, perhaps creating a new field, or at least making novel connections between them. You continue this process as long as you wish—in Matsuoka's case, she never stops expanding. Ultimately you create a field that is uniquely your own. This second version fits in well with a culture where information is so widely available, and in which connecting ideas is a

form of power.

In either direction, you have found a niche that is not crowded with competitors. You have freedom to roam, to pursue particular questions that interest you. You set your own agenda and command the resources available to this niche. Unburdened by overwhelming competition and politicking, you have time and space to bring to flower your Life's Task.

3. Avoid the false path—The rebellion strategy

In 1760, at the age of four, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart took up the piano under his father's instruction. It was Wolfgang who asked to start lessons at this precocious age; his sister, age seven, had already started on the instrument. Perhaps it was partly out of sibling rivalry that he had taken such initiative, seeing the attention and love that his sister received for her playing and wanting it for himself.

After the first few months of practice, his father, Leopold—a talented player, composer, and teacher himself—could see that Wolfgang was exceptional. Most strange for his age, the boy loved to practice; at night his parents had to drag him away from the piano. He began to compose his own pieces at the age of five. Soon, Leopold took this prodigy and his sister on the road to perform in all the capitals of Europe. Wolfgang dazzled the royal audiences for whom he performed. He played with assurance and could improvise all kinds of clever melodies. He was like a precious toy. The father was now earning a nice income for the family, as more and more courts wanted to see the child genius in action.

As the patriarch of the family, Leopold demanded total obedience from his children, even though it was now young Wolfgang who was essentially supporting them all. Wolfgang willingly submitted—he owed everything to his father. But as he entered adolescence something else stirred within him. Was it playing the piano that he enjoyed, or simply attracting all of this attention? He felt confused. After so many years composing music he was finally developing his own style, and yet his father insisted that he focus on writing the more conventional pieces that pleased the royal audiences and brought the family money. The city of Salzburg, where they lived, was provincial and bourgeois. In general, he yearned for something else, to be on his own. With each passing year, Wolfgang felt increasingly stifled.

Finally, in 1777, the father allowed Wolfgang—now twenty-one—to leave for Paris, accompanied by his mother. There he must try to gain a prominent position as conductor, so that he could continue supporting his family. But Wolfgang did not find Paris to his liking. The jobs he was offered seemed beneath his talents. And then his mother fell ill while there and died on the way back home. The trip was a disaster in all possible ways. Wolfgang returned to Salzburg, chastened and prepared to submit to his father's will. He accepted a rather uninteresting position as the court organist, but he could not completely suppress his unease. He despaired of spending his life in this mediocre position,

writing music to please these petty provincials. At one point, he wrote his father: "I am a composer…. I neither can nor ought to bury the talent for composition with which God in his goodness has so richly endowed me."

Leopold reacted to these increasingly frequent complaints of his son with anger, reminding him of the debt he owed him for all of the training he had received and the expenses the father had incurred in their endless travels. Finally, in a flash, it came to Wolfgang: it was never really the piano that was his love, nor even music per se. He did not enjoy performing before others like a puppet. It was composing that he was destined for; but more than that, he had an intense love for the theater. He wanted to compose operas—that was his true voice. He would never realize this if he remained in Salzburg. It was his father who represented more than an obstacle; he was in fact ruining his life, his health, his confidence. It was not just about money; his father was actually jealous of his son's talents, and whether consciously or not, he was trying to stifle his progress. Wolfgang had to take a step, however painful, before it was too late.

On a trip to Vienna in 1781, Wolfgang made the fateful decision to stay. He would never return to Salzburg. As if Wolfgang had broken some great taboo, his father could never forgive him for this; his son had abandoned the family. The rift between them would never be repaired. Feeling that he had lost so much time under his father's thumb, Wolfgang composed at a furious pace, his most famous operas and compositions pouring out of him as if he were possessed.

A false path in life is generally something we are attracted to for the wrong reasons—money, fame, attention, and so on. If it is attention we need, we often experience a kind of emptiness inside that we are hoping to fill with the false love of public approval. Because the field we choose does not correspond with our deepest inclinations, we rarely find the fulfillment that we crave. Our work suffers for this, and the attention we may have gotten in the beginning starts to fade—a painful process. If it is money and comfort that dominate our decision, we are most often acting out of anxiety and the need to please our parents. They may steer us toward something lucrative out of care and concern, but lurking underneath this can be something else—perhaps a bit of envy that we have more freedom than they had when they were young.

Your strategy must be twofold: first, to realize as early as possible that you have chosen your career for the wrong reasons, before your confidence takes a hit. And second, to actively rebel against those forces that have pushed you away from your true path. Scoff at the need for attention and approval—they will lead

you astray. Feel some anger and resentment at the parental forces that want to foist upon you an alien vocation. It is a healthy part of your development to follow a path independent of your parents and to establish your own identity. Let your sense of rebellion fill you with energy and purpose. If it is the father figure, the Leopold Mozart, that is blocking your path, you must slay him and clear the way.

4. Let go of the past—The adaptation strategy

From the time he was born in 1960, Freddie Roach was groomed to be a boxing champion. His father had been a professional fighter himself, and his mother a boxing judge. Freddie's older brother began learning the sport at an early age, and when Freddie was six he was promptly taken to the local gym in south Boston to begin a rigorous apprenticeship in the sport. He trained with a coach several hours a day, six days a week.

By the age of fifteen he felt like he was burned out. He made more and more excuses to avoid going to the gym. One day his mother sensed this and said to him, "Why do you fight anyway? You just get hit all the time. You can't fight." He was used to the constant criticism from his father and brothers, but to hear such a frank assessment from his mother had a bracing effect. Clearly, she saw his older brother as the one destined for greatness. Now Freddie determined that he would somehow prove her wrong. He returned to his training regimen with a vengeance. He discovered within himself a passion for practice and discipline. He enjoyed the sensation of getting better, the trophies that began to pile up, and, more than anything, the fact that he could now actually beat his brother. His love for the sport was rekindled.

As Freddie now showed the most promise of the brothers, his father took him to Las Vegas to help further his career. There, at the age of eighteen, he met the legendary coach Eddie Futch and began to train under him. It all looked very promising—he was chosen for the United States boxing team and began to climb up the ranks. Before long, however, he hit another wall. He would learn the most effective maneuvers from Futch and practice them to perfection, but in an actual bout it was another story. As soon as he got hit in the ring, he would revert to fighting instinctually; his emotions would get the better of him. His fights would turn into brawls over many rounds, and he would often lose.

After a few years, Futch told Roach it was time to retire. But boxing had been his whole life; retire and do what? He continued to fight and to lose, until finally he could see the writing on the wall and retired. He took a job in telemarketing and began to drink heavily. Now he hated the sport—he had given it so much and had nothing to show for his efforts. Almost in spite of himself, one day he returned to Futch's gym to watch his friend Virgil Hill spar with a boxer about to fight for a title. Both fighters trained under Futch, but there was nobody in Hill's corner helping him, so Freddie brought him water and gave him advice. He showed up the following day to help Hill again, and soon became a regular at Futch's gym. He was not being paid, so he kept his telemarketing job,

but something in him smelled opportunity—and he was desperate. He showed up on time and stayed later than anyone else. Knowing Futch's techniques so well, he could teach them to all of the fighters. His responsibilities began to grow.

In the back of his mind he could not shake his resentment of boxing, and he questioned how long he could keep this up. It was a dog-eat-dog career and trainers rarely lasted very long in the business. Would this turn into yet another routine in which he would endlessly repeat the same exercises he had learned from Futch? A part of him yearned to return to fighting—at least fighting was not so predictable.

One day Virgil Hill showed him a technique he had picked up from some Cuban fighters: Instead of working with a punching bag, they mostly trained with the coach, who wore large padded mitts. Standing in the ring, the fighters half-sparred with the coach and practiced their punches. Roach tried it with Hill and his eyes lit up. It brought him back into the ring, but there was something else. Boxing, he felt, had become stale, as had its training methods. In his mind, he saw a way to adapt the mitt work for more than just punching practice. It could be a way for a trainer to devise an entire strategy in the ring and demonstrate it to his fighter in real time. It could revolutionize and revitalize the sport itself. Roach began to develop this with the stable of fighters that he now trained. He instructed them in maneuvers that were much more fluid and strategic.

Soon he left Futch to work on his own. He quickly established a reputation for preparing his boxers better than anyone else, and within a few years he rose to become the most successful trainer of his generation.

In dealing with your career and its inevitable changes, you must think in the following way: You are not tied to a particular position; your loyalty is not to a career or a company. You are committed to your Life's Task, to giving it full expression. It is up to you to find it and guide it correctly. It is not up to others to protect or help you. *You are on your own*. Change is inevitable, particularly in such a revolutionary moment as ours. Since you are on your own, it is up to you to foresee the changes going on right now in your profession. You must adapt your Life's Task to these circumstances. You do not hold on to past ways of doing things, because that will ensure you will fall behind and suffer for it. You are flexible and always looking to adapt.

If change is forced upon you, as it was for Freddie Roach, you must resist the temptation to overreact or feel sorry for yourself. Roach instinctively found

his way back to the ring because he understood that what he loved was not boxing per se, but competitive sports and strategizing. Thinking in this way, he could adapt his inclinations to a new direction *within* boxing. Like Roach, you don't want to abandon the skills and experience you have gained, but to find a new way to apply them. Your eye is on the future, not the past. Often such creative readjustments lead to a superior path for us—we are shaken out of our complacency and forced to reassess where we are headed. Remember: your Life's Task is a living, breathing organism. The moment you rigidly follow a plan set in your youth, you lock yourself into a position, and the times will ruthlessly pass you by.

5. Find your way back—The life-or-death strategy

As a very young child Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983) knew that he experienced the world differently than others. He was born with extreme nearsightedness. Everything around him was a blur, and so his other senses developed to compensate for this—particularly touch and smell. Even after he was prescribed glasses at the age of five, he continued to perceive the world around him with more than just his eyes. He had a tactile form of intelligence.

Fuller was an extremely resourceful child. He once invented a new kind of oar to help propel him across the lakes in Maine where he spent his summers delivering mail. Its design was modeled after the motion of jellyfish, which he had observed and studied. He could envision the dynamics of their movement with more than his eyes—he *felt* the movement. He reproduced this motion in his newfangled oar and it functioned beautifully. During such summers he would dream of other interesting inventions—these would be his life's work, his destiny.

Being different, however, had its painful side. He had no patience for the usual forms of education. Although he was very bright and had been admitted to Harvard University, he could not adapt to its strict style of learning. He skipped classes, began to drink, and led a rather bohemian lifestyle. The officials at Harvard expelled him twice—the second time for good.

After that he bounced from job to job. He worked at a meatpacking plant and then, during World War I, he secured a good position in the navy. He had an incredible feel for machines and how their parts worked in concert. But he was restless, and could not stay too long in one place. After the war he had a wife and child to support, and despairing of ever being able to care for them properly, he decided to take a high-paying position as a sales manager. He worked hard, did a decent job, but after three months the company folded. He had found the work extremely unsatisfying, but it seemed that such jobs were all he could expect from life.

Finally, a few months later, a chance appeared out of nowhere. His father-in-law had invented a way of producing materials for houses that would end up making them more durable and better insulated, and at a much lower cost. But the father could not find investors or anyone willing to help him set up a business. Fuller thought his idea brilliant. He had always been interested in housing and architecture, and so he offered to take charge of implementing this new technology. He put everything he could into the effort and was even able to improve on the materials to be used. Fuller's father-in-law supported his work,

and together they formed the Stockade Building System. Money from investors, mostly family members, allowed them to open factories. The company struggled—the technology was too new and radical, and Fuller was too much of a purist to compromise his desire to revolutionize the construction industry. After five years the company was sold and Fuller was fired as president.

Now the situation looked bleaker than ever. The family had been living well in Chicago on his salary, beyond its means. In those five years he had not managed to save anything. Winter was approaching and his prospects for work seemed very slim—his reputation was in tatters. One evening he walked along Lake Michigan and thought of his life up until then. He had disappointed his wife, and he had lost money for his father-in-law and his friends who had invested in the enterprise. He was useless at business and a burden to everyone. Finally he decided upon suicide as the best option. He would drown himself in the lake. He had a good insurance policy, and his wife's family would take better care of her than he had been able to. As he walked toward the water, he mentally prepared himself for death.

Suddenly something stopped him in his tracks—what he would describe later as a voice, coming from nearby or perhaps from within him. It said, "From now on you need never await temporal attestation to your thought. You think the truth. You do not have the right to eliminate yourself. You do not belong to you. You belong to Universe. Your significance will remain forever obscure to you, but you may assume that you are fulfilling your role if you apply yourself to converting your experiences to the highest advantage of others." Never having heard voices before, Fuller could only imagine it as something real. Stunned by these words, he turned away from the water and headed home.

On the way there he began to ponder the words and to reassess his life, now in a different light. Perhaps what he had perceived moments earlier as his mistakes were not mistakes at all. He had tried to fit into a world (business) in which he did not belong. The world was telling him this if he only listened. The Stockade experience was not all a waste—he had learned some invaluable lessons about human nature. He should have no regrets. The truth was that he *was* different. In his mind he imagined all kinds of inventions—new kinds of cars, houses, building structures—that reflected his unusual perceptual skills. It struck him, as he looked around at row after row of apartment housing on his way back, that people suffered more from sameness, from the inability to think of doing things differently, than from nonconformity.

He swore that from that moment on he would listen to nothing except his own experience, his own voice. He would create an alternative way of making things that would open people's eyes to new possibilities. The money would

eventually come. Whenever he thought of money first, disaster followed. He would take care of his family, but they would have to live frugally for the moment.

Over the years, Fuller kept to this promise. The pursuit of his peculiar ideas led to the design of inexpensive and energy-efficient forms of transportation and shelter (the Dymaxion car and Dymaxion house), and to the invention of the geodesic dome—a whole new form of architectural structure. Fame and money soon followed.

No good can ever come from deviating from the path that you were destined to follow. You will be assailed by varieties of hidden pain. Most often you deviate because of the lure of money, of more immediate prospects of prosperity. Because this does not comply with something deep within you, your interest will lag and eventually the money will not come so easily. You will search for other easy sources of money, moving further and further away from your path. Not seeing clearly ahead of you, you will end up in a dead-end career. Even if your material needs are met, you will feel an emptiness inside that you will need to fill with any kind of belief system, drugs, or diversions. There is no compromise here, no way of escaping the dynamic. You will recognize how far you have deviated by the depth of your pain and frustration. You must listen to the message of this frustration, this pain, and let it guide you as clearly as Fuller's voice guided him. It is a matter of life and death.

The way back requires a sacrifice. You cannot have everything in the present. The road to mastery requires patience. You will have to keep your focus on five or ten years down the road, when you will reap the rewards of your efforts. The process of getting there, however, is full of challenges and pleasures. Make your return to the path a resolution you set for yourself, and then tell others about it. It becomes a matter of shame and embarrassment to deviate from this path. In the end, the money and success that truly last come not to those who focus on such things as goals, but rather to those who focus on mastery and fulfilling their Life's Task.

REVERSAL

Some people do not become aware of inclinations or future career paths in their childhood, but instead are made painfully aware of their limitations. They are not

good at what others seem to find easy or manageable. The idea of a calling in life is alien to them. In some cases they internalize the judgments and criticisms of others, and come to see themselves as essentially deficient. If they are not careful, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nobody faced this fate more powerfully than Temple Grandin. In 1950, at the age of three, she was diagnosed with autism. She had yet to make any progress in learning language, and it was thought that this would remain her condition—and that she would need to be institutionalized her entire life. But her mother wanted to try one last option before giving up: she sent Temple to a speech therapist, who miraculously, slowly managed to teach her language, which allowed her to attend school and begin to learn what other children were learning.

Despite this improvement, Temple's future appeared limited at best. Her mind functioned in a different way—she thought in terms of images, not words. In order to learn a word she had to be able to picture it in her mind. This made it hard to understand abstract words or learn mathematics. She was also not good at socializing with other children, who often made fun of her for her differences. With such learning disabilities, what could she hope to do in life beyond some kind of menial job? To make matters worse, she had an extremely active mind, and without something to concentrate on, she would give in to feelings of intense anxiety.

Whenever she felt troubled, Temple instinctively retreated to two activities that were comfortable to her: interacting with animals and building things with her hands. With animals, particularly horses, she had an uncanny ability to sense their feelings and thoughts. She became an expert horseback rider. Because she tended to think first in images, when it came to making things with her hands (like sewing or woodwork), she could envision the finished product in her mind and then easily put it together.

At the age of eleven, Temple went to visit an aunt who had a ranch in Arizona. There she realized that she had an even greater sense of empathy for cattle than she did for horses. One day she watched with particular interest as some of the cattle were placed in a squeeze chute that pressed them on their sides to relax them before their vaccination shots. Throughout her childhood Temple had had the desire to be held tightly, but could not stand being held by an adult—she felt like she had no control in such a situation, and would panic. She pleaded with her aunt to allow her to be put into the squeeze device herself. The aunt agreed, and for thirty minutes Temple gave in to the feeling of pressure she had always dreamed of. Once it was over, she felt an enormous sense of calmness. After that experience she became obsessed with the machine, and

several years later managed to build her own primitive version of it that she could use at home.

Now she was obsessed with the subject of cattle, squeeze chutes, and the effect of touch and pressure on autistic children. In order to satisfy her curiosity, she had to develop reading and researching skills. Once she did, she found she had unusually high powers of concentration—she could read for hours on one subject without getting the slightest bit bored. Her research slowly expanded into books on psychology, biology, and science in general. Because of the intellectual skills she had developed, she was admitted into a university. Her horizons were slowly expanding.

Several years later, she found herself pursuing a master's degree in Animal Sciences at Arizona State University. There, her obsession with cattle resurfaced —she wanted to do a detailed analysis of feedlots and cattle chutes in particular, to help understand the behavioral responses of the animals. Her professors there could not understand such an interest, and told her it was not possible. Never being one to take no for an answer, she found professors in another department who would sponsor her. She did her study, and in the process finally caught a glimpse of her Life's Task.

She was not destined for a life in the university. She was a practical person who liked to build things and yet needed constant mental stimulation. She decided she would carve out her own peculiar career path. Starting off freelance, she offered her services to various ranches and feedlots, designing cattle chutes that were much more suited to the animals and more efficient. Slowly, with her visual sense of design and engineering, she taught herself the rudiments of the business. She expanded her services to designing more humane slaughterhouses and systems for managing farm animals.

With this career solidly in place, she proceeded to go further: she became a writer; she returned to the university as a professor; she transformed herself into a gifted lecturer on animals and autism. Somehow she had managed to overcome all of the seemingly insurmountable obstructions in her path and find her way to the Life's Task that suited her to perfection.

When you are faced with deficiencies instead of strengths and inclinations, this is the strategy you must assume: ignore your weaknesses and resist the temptation to be more like others. Instead, like Temple Grandin, direct yourself toward the small things you are good at. Do not dream or make grand plans for the future, but instead concentrate on becoming proficient at these simple and

immediate skills. This will bring you confidence and become a base from which you can expand to other pursuits. Proceeding in this way, step by step, you will hit upon your Life's Task.

Understand: Your Life's Task does not always appear to you through some grand or promising inclination. It can appear in the guise of your deficiencies, making you focus on the one or two things that you are inevitably good at. Working at these skills, you learn the value of discipline and see the rewards you get from your efforts. Like a lotus flower, your skills will expand outward from a center of strength and confidence. Do not envy those who seem to be naturally gifted; it is often a curse, as such types rarely learn the value of diligence and focus, and they pay for this later in life. This strategy applies as well to any setbacks and difficulties we may experience. In such moments, it is generally wise to stick to the few things we know and do well, and to reestablish our confidence.

If someone like Temple Grandin, with so much against her at birth, can find her way to her Life's Task and to mastery, it means it must be a power accessible to us all.

> *Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path. You may remember this "something" as a signal calling in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am…If not this vivid and sure, the call may have been more like gentle pushings in the stream in which you drifted unknowingly to a particular spot on the bank. Looking back, you sense that fate had a hand in it…. A calling may be postponed, avoided, intermittently missed. It may also possess you completely. Whatever; eventually it will out. It makes its claim…. Extraordinary people display calling most evidently. Perhaps that's why they fascinate. Perhaps, too, they are extraordinary because their calling comes through so clearly and they are so loyal to it…. Extraordinary people bear the better witness because they show what ordinary mortals simply can't. We seem to have less motivation and more distraction. Yet our destiny is driven by the same universal engine. Extraordinary people are not a different category; the workings of this engine in them are simply more transparent….*
>
> —JAMES HILLMAN